

THE BLOOD TUNDRA

150 years ago, there was another village in Lakeroot Valley. Near a mountain lake that the Kobolds used to dock ships and airships alike, there was Heartwood Village. The Kobolds who lived there had rich red fur, and it was said that it got its color from the wood of the trees that grew in the mountains, with which the Kobolds shared a deep bond.

Heartwood Village prided itself on industry, and was prosperous. Its architecture was beautiful and reaching, pointed ever towards the sky. Like other Kobold villages, its villagers enjoyed sparring and training themselves to be stronger. From the latest generation of warriors, two promising young Kobolds rose as the pride of Heartwood: Alder the Brave and Luka the Clever. They had trained together since birth, and all thought they would stand at each other's side forever.

But as every airship lifted from Heartwood Lake, a piece of Alder's heart seemed to rise with it. He yearned for adventure beyond the mountains, and glory that would bring honor to his village. Luka watched this change settle upon their dear friend, and grew afraid that the two of them would be separated. As they stood in the shadow of a great beast statue whose name had been long forgotten, Luka heard a voice.

In arms, entwined.

The words they and Alder had spoken as children. A promise that they would remain together, arms locked together tightly as tree roots, railing against anything that would separate them.

Luka grew fixated on the echoes of their promise, and the voice continued to whisper at the fringes of their mind, tugging and tangling their thoughts.

One night, Luka came upon Alder packing his belongings. It was clear at once that it would be more than just a week's journey.

"What would it take to make you stay?" Luka asked him in the lantern light.

"My mind's made up," Alder said, though not without sorrow. "Short of war, I need to go, and find my own path and place in this world."

The darkness rose around Luka, shrouding their mind and smothering all thought. They grabbed Alder's sword, and ran. They knew not where their feet were carrying them until they came to a stop in a clearing, where a Wayfarer stood, harvesting pure and sparkling snow from the cliffside. Luka's grip tightened, and they raised the sword.

They lept, lifted on wings of whisper and shade, high enough to strike down the sacred creature, and as its blood ran into the snow, the land cried out a curse on all who dwelled upon it.

The Heartwood villagers fell into a blood rage, losing all sense and thought. They descended their mountain, and drew their swords against the other villages. A great battle ensued. Arrowpeak and Ogasa, though they fought each other most often, raised their shields and swords skyward, and roared out an ancient spell of severing, to cut away the wounding land before its curse could run through them as well.

The Heartwood was rended from the life of the planet, cast out with its villagers whose rage soon drained, leaving an echoing hollowness within. Neither dead nor alive, in a land poisoned by the blood of the Wayfarer, the villagers' fur grew white, and they began to lose themselves to the stillness of an endless winter. Only one Kobold seemed unshaken: Luka, who took their position as the leader of the cursed land. They would shepherd their addled flock, even as it dwindled as minds were lost over time, and they would keep Alder close beside them, no matter the cost.

Though safely severed from an unspeakable curse, the planet's wound remained deep. As it bled out it sought the power of the Queens, whose life force had been forever bound to its own. The Queens were wrenched into deep sleep, all energy directed towards mending the planet.

Time passed, and stories were buried by snow. It never takes long to forget the lessons of the past, when the tellers are so eager to forget them.

Now the Queens have slept for 150 years, and with each passing cycle they seem to drift further away from waking. With them seems to go memory and knowledge of the past, as if someone were taking it all for themselves.

LADY AMARYLLIS THE RIFTWALKER, AND "THAT WHOLE THING"

Hundreds of years ago, when the Spark Queens' rule was new, hungry, and antagonistic, a gleaming kirin entered their court. Her voice rang out clearly, carrying the weight of the knowledge she bore, and the Queens' endless argument quieted.

She was Amaryllis, and she walked the corridors of the Betwixt to divine futures from the tangled echoes of the past. Her wise words stemmed the flow of the Queens' rivalry, and with her as their advisor, their rule settled into prosperous peace.

The three of them grew to be the greatest of friends, and Amaryllis helped them seek out new forms for their Sparks. Together they ran, wild and free, on fleet hoof and claw.

Amaryllis drove deeper into the rifts of the Betwixt, ever seeking new secrets to tell her Queens.

One day she did not return.

The Queens fell familiarly to each other's throats, each blaming the other for not looking after their fair Lady, for asking too much. They closed the byways of the Betwixt, and their disdain was stoked and flamed for many years, but eventually it quieted again. It was not befitting of their Lady.

The world changed, wars were fought or lost, and Lady Amaryllis fell into memory.

Centuries later, Sparks began to vanish from Feral without a trace, and rumors were whispered that they had been called into the Betwixt, but the Queens were at a loss.

Then one day, the Queens dreamed of her. Her voice was reaching to them, clear as it had ever been, from within a rift. They awoke with tears on their cheeks.

Queen Delilah took to her tomes, and in secret, she reopened a path to the Betwixt. The lost Sparks were there, cracked but alive. She sustained her portal, ushering all to escape as she searched for a familiar face. If they'd heard her voice, then their lost Lady must be somewhere among the Sparks that had vanished.

At last a resplendent figure appeared before her, the kirin's armor now sharpened to a sheen as tendrils of shade danced around her like sprites. Their Lady had returned, changed. Her once clear voice was now fringed with words that came from sources beyond her throat.

Delilah choked out her name, strained by the magic's portal. She felt a rift opening inside her, as a crack began to creep along her Spark.

Lady Amaryllis watched her, waiting for her knees to buckle.

Their Lady was lost to them, and had been for a long time.

It was then that Aradia reached Delilah, having been alerted by the Sparks who had escaped the rift. She turned to see Lady Amaryllis, damaged but whole, at last, and ran for her.

Delilah grabbed Aradia's wing before the two of them could touch, and, before her Spark could crack in half from the strain, collapsed the rift upon them.

A shard of Aradia's Spark—the hand she was using to reach for Amaryllis—was broken off, and lost into the Betwixt.

The Queens were broken, their tenuous friendship now shattered irrevocably. To Aradia, Delilah had been selfish, going off to face the dangers of the Betwixt alone and not caring what happened to herself. Not believing that Amaryllis could still be saved. To Delilah, Aradia had been reckless, endangering herself by following her into the Betwixt, and trying to save someone long gone. Doom could have been unleashed upon everything they had built together. But their wounds ran deeper even than that. Neither of them forgive themselves for being the cause of the others' Spark's irrevocable damage. If Aradia had been faster, Delilah's Spark would not have been cracked. If Delilah had been stronger, she wouldn't have chipped off a shard of Aradia's Spark.

The damage the Queens and their Sparks sustained caused them to fall into hibernation, and when they awoke, they were never able to shapeshift again. Aradia's fae wings had been shattered, and Delilah's beauty corroded. They remade themselves, now Aradia the Fell Queen and Delilah the Lich Queen, and embarked again on their pursuits of perfection.

The Lady's siren song tugs on them still when they sleep, promising a queendom where they can all run wild again beneath the stars.